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# The voice of Chesterton in the conversation of England<sup>1</sup>

Julia Stapleton

Julia Stapleton is Reader in Politics at the University of Durham. She is the author of *Christianity Patriotism and Nationhood: The England of G.K. Chesterton* (Lanham Md., Lexington Books, 2009).

One of the most fundamental but neglected aspects of G.K. Chesterton's thought is his commitment to the idea of England. By England, he meant just that, not Britain. Many of his essays wax indignant about the confusion between England and Britain that prevailed in his time, and the self-effacement, not, as was often thought, the aggrandisement of the English it represented. In reviewing a book of English ballads for *The Speaker* in 1901 he insisted that England's identity is a separate identity: that England is not an island, but a peninsula. Moreover, he took pains to add that in spite of its apparent insignificance, it was a country to which its inhabitants were "deeply and mysteriously attached."<sup>2</sup> This statement is not isolated but forms a *leitmotif* running throughout Chesterton's writing, particularly his early journalism for the leading Liberal daily, *The Daily News*. It raises a number of questions concerning the origins and nature of the tie that clearly meant much to him and, he claimed, others too. It also raises questions concerning the manner in which he played the "English" card in political and religious controversy and his historical and contemporary significance in this regard.

It is important to address these issues not only to enhance understanding of Chesterton himself, but to enrich responses to "the English question" that has become increasingly salient in current political debate in Britain. This centres on England's place in the United Kingdom following her exclusion from the devolutionary settlement that was made in 1999 with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Drawing on the political thought of Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990), Arthur Aughey has argued that conversation is axiomatic to the meaning of Englishness, serving an imaginative rather than a functional purpose.<sup>3</sup> The sheer volume and diversity of historical discourses concerning England underlines the absence of a grand narrative in English nationhood. Instead, English identity has been articulated and deployed by a multitude of different voices, Chesterton's included, and in a conversational mode that precludes fixity and finality.

The parallels between Chesterton's contribution to English conversation and Oakeshott's sensibilities are close. First, they share an antipathy towards the rationalist impulse in politics. For Oakeshott this is embodied in the Tower of Babel myth that there is a "short cut to heaven." The myth errs in ignoring the "poetic" nature of what Oakeshott calls human moral activity and its basis in practice rather than abstract thought.<sup>4</sup> The delusions of grandeur to which neglect of this truth can yield are forcefully expressed throughout his writings. But Chesterton also dwelt upon the pitfalls of rationalism, for example in an essay for *The Daily News* that was republished in 1958:

Destruction awaits not the man who swims in the sea, but the man who tries to plumb it. The danger is not for the swimmer who lets the tide carry him hither and thither and to whom the sea is infinite; the danger awaits the swimmer who tries to swim across the sea and make it finite. And in the same

way the psychological danger lies in wait for the man who tries to measure all things, for it is that way that madness lies. The brain cracks when the man tries to cram the whole universe inside it and bar the doors, not when man's mind is like some vast and hospitable tree, nested in by birds out of strange countries and swayed by winds out of the ends of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Second, Oakeshott and Chesterton both emphasize the contingency of the relationship between historical events.<sup>6</sup> Third, they emphasize the active creation of the self through engagement with various traditions of thought and behaviour, the process, in Oakeshott's words, of "making and moving among images."<sup>7</sup> Fourth, they share an appreciation of the importance of the intrepid mind and spirit to the intellectual and moral life of the West.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence that Oakeshott had read any of Chesterton's work. Significantly, however, as a History Fellow at Cambridge from 1925 to 1949, he was close to the historian Herbert Butterfield, who had been influenced by Chesterton's conception of the undetermined nature of the past.<sup>9</sup> Nor should the affinities between their thought be pushed too far; not least, Oakeshott's Burkean approach to politics could not be more distant from Chesterton's instinct for revolution. Nevertheless, the ground they did share makes Chesterton an obvious candidate for consideration in a perspective on Englishness that owes much to Oakeshott's influence. The title of this article is an adaptation of the title of one of Oakeshott's essays, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind".

Turning first to the origins of Chesterton's Englishness, the formative influence was undoubtedly his home. In his *Autobiography* he makes no mention of overt displays of English nationalism as being a part of his upbringing; on the contrary, the powerful English impressions of his early life were more due to what was not said than to what was. While reports of the upsurge of nationalism in other parts of the world, not least in Ireland, would have streamed in upon the family through the coverage it received in papers like *The Illustrated London News*, the English loyalty and identity of the Chestertons remained undisputed and unarticulated. Englishness became lodged in Chesterton's subconscious, that powerhouse of his being that William Oddie has done so much to illuminate in the context of his religion.<sup>10</sup> It was primarily the paternal side of the family that fired his English imagination, and Chesterton constructed a portrait of the typical English person from the character and habits he observed in it. The multiple hobbies of his father, especially, struck him as the quintessence of the English national character; they were symptomatic of a certain double life, exterior and interior, that was unique to England. Unlike the American businessman, whose profession was his life, the livelihood his father made out of selling houses as part of the family firm of Chesterton and Sons was simply a means to an end. The more important part of his life was cluttered with pastimes of no commercial value; it was a direct expression, Chesterton thought, of the "amateurism" that characterised the English people and was in turn intimately bound up with their "sleepy sanity" and their "good sense not untinged with dreaminess."<sup>11</sup>

This was a tone that Chesterton attempted to inject into his understanding of nationhood, English nationhood especially. In his view, the racial theory of nationhood was without foundation, the work of intellectuals who had no roots in the people. He treated with disdain the attempt by Victorian historians such as Edward Freeman and J.R. Green to identify the Teutonic origins of the English people and to trace their lineage back further to what has been described as "that ur-people of remote antiquity, the Aryans."<sup>12</sup> They were simply propagators of the Whig myth that England's destiny as a nation lay in blazing a trail for

parliamentary democracy, the legacy of the Saxon invaders. Quite apart from the question of whether the influence of the Saxons was greater in the realm of politics than religion – he emphasized the latter<sup>13</sup> – Chesterton grounded nationhood in a sense of belonging. In his eyes, all that was required to qualify as a member of a nation was imaginative connection with it, and devotion to its well-being as an end in itself. In this sense he spoke the language of patriotism more than nationalism. Nationalists were obsessed with “origins” and maintaining the racial “purity” of the nation but patriots were those, such as his ancestors, for whom national identity was a given, not the result of academic inquiry. In one of his *Daily News* columns in 1906, he wrote that like generations of Englishmen before them, his forefathers believed “as a solid and most sacred reality that there was a thing called England and a sentiment of patriotism which ought to be felt towards it.”<sup>14</sup> Whether they were correct in this belief was irrelevant beside the *fact* of their belief. As he wrote in his *A Short History of England* published in 1917, “We may find men wrong in what they thought they were, but we cannot find them wrong in what they thought they thought.”<sup>15</sup>

Chesterton turned this emphasis on the immediacy of national identity not just upon misguided historians but also the various “sham” patriots who interpreted national well-being in instrumental terms. These were usually to be found in elite circles, bolstered by literary figures such as Kipling and Sir Alfred Austin, Tennyson’s successor as poet laureate. Ignoring Austin’s paeans to England in anthologies such as *English Prose* (1890) which became overshadowed by his more inferior, official poems, Chesterton tarred both writers with the same brush. Unlike a previous generation of poets and writers who had “brought poetry into politics,” they had erred in bringing politics into poetry.<sup>16</sup> As anxieties about Britain’s capacity to compete with other European powers increased in the Edwardian years, Chesterton championed the non-instrumental, or what he called the “irrational” patriot. In a *Daily News* article in 1905, he maintained that the instrumental patriot merely loved his country for what he perceived as its current prowess; by contrast, the irrational patriot’s love for and loyalty to his country were unclouded by conceptions of its strength in the world, real or illusory. In a telling phrase, Chesterton argued that the Kingdom of the irrational patriot was “not of this world,” telling first because it emphasizes the close alignment between his patriotism and his Christian faith and second, because it echoed his conception of the “dreaminess” and “sleepy sanity” of the English as much in matters of nationhood as in everything else. Indeed, his championing of the “unreasonable patriot” was framed in terms of the (true) English patriot:

He is not obliged to cling to the imaginary merits of his country; for he did not take her on her merits... He will not be asked to swallow any such insanity as that England is politically more efficient than the Continent. He will not be such a greenhorn as not to know that English politics are corrupt. His relations with his country will be dark and elemental, like the relations of lovers. To him England will cry not any of the pompous appeals to lead the race or reform the world which she cried to Kipling or Henley; she will cry the words of that old and very English song:

Love me still and know not why,

So hast thou the same reason still

To dote on me for ever.<sup>17</sup>

The reference here to Kipling, especially, lies at the heart of Chesterton's conception of England as a nation, and also the source of its strength: an abiding local patriotism centred on place. To his mind this was the essence not just of the English but the European concept of the nation, making English nationhood much less complex and "exceptional" than was often thought at the time, and since. (We will return to the context of this concept in Christendom presently.) For Chesterton, Kipling came to epitomise the imperialist usurpations of patriotism, to the detriment of England as much as the countries that were at the sharp end of imperialist oppression. This is clear in his review of Kipling's anthology of poems *The Five Nations* in 1903. He began the review in his usual magnanimous manner: defending his opponent against misguided criticism, in this case, for example, that Kipling was "brutal." On the contrary, he maintained, Kipling was characterised by an admirable "restlessness and accessibility to impressions, the tendency to wander and to try new novelties, which is typical of man and not of the brutes." Nor, he insisted, should the anthology be judged by the worst poems it contained, for all poets were capable of bad poetry, and some of the poems included in the anthology represented an exceptional Kipling, of great "restraint and mildness." Nevertheless, he could not resist quoting one of the anthology's less inspirational lines, from the poem "Boots":

We're foot-slog-slog-slog-sloggin over Africa.

But what Chesterton could not forgive was Kipling's grave misunderstanding of the local focus of patriotism, bordering on contempt. Kipling's famous poem "Sussex," his only attempt to write a patriotic poem about England to date Chesterton pointed out, erred fundamentally in asserting that

God gave all men all earth to love

But since man's heart is small...

At this point in the review, Chesterton could hardly contain his outrage. "There you have naked in that couplet the man who begins as a cosmopolitan and only ends as a patriot, of whom cosmopolitanism is a religion and patriotism only a fad. No man who had begun by loving his country would say that he loved it 'because man's heart is small.'" This was all of a piece with Kipling's conception that it was possible to belong to "five nations" at once, just as the oriental believed it was possible to have five wives concurrently. Kipling's error was compounded by his belief that certain nations, the Boers for example, were expendable. Worse still was his assumption that recompense could be given to those who had lost their nationhood by incorporating them into another nation, the aggressor nation. This was in the same manner that a Turk who had stolen a Christian wife for his seraglio might offer to make amends by replacing her with three of his other wives. Chesterton emphasised that Kipling's thinking here showed him to be an Oriental through and through. His promiscuity regarding national attachments threatened to undermine the very cosmopolitanism he so affected to embrace: for nationality was outward, not inward looking, a window – the only window – on the world at large.

For Chesterton, Kipling did well to light on Sussex as a means of expressing his English patriotism. (Such as that patriotism was, of course: citing Kipling's poem "The Return," he emphasised that Kipling would readily "chuck England if she were not, in his opinion, a great Empire!"<sup>18</sup>) Sussex, the county in which Kipling had made his home, was also a focal point

of Chesterton's English attachment, as well as all the London boroughs, whose patriotic cause he championed in his novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and other writings. For Chesterton, a fundamental fact about nationhood was that it could only be grasped through its local manifestations, just as humanity at large could only be grasped through its national variations. But the question arises as to what made nations anything more than arbitrary groupings of different localities? What gave England its coherence and made it more than simply the sum of its local parts? If Chesterton wanted to distance himself from all "essentialist" understandings of English nationhood, those that focused on race especially, what made England a national whole?

The answer to this question lies in the unity of historical and cultural experience, even within a wider unity of civilization, which marks off one nation from another. In his recent book, Joseph McCleod has addressed this issue with much insight, emphasising that for Chesterton the roots of local attachment lie in the propensity of human nature to seek both unity and differentiation. In Chesterton's frame of analysis, human beings resist what McCleod calls the "levelling" of their own personality to accommodate specious conceptions of history as driven by universal forces, the kind of conception advanced by cosmopolitan thinkers such as H.G. Wells. This would deny both divine and human liberty. At the same time, the nations that endure are those that build upwards from smaller associations, not those that are products of grandiose plans imposed from above by leaders and cadres concerned with extending the reach of their power.<sup>19</sup>

McCleod also draws attention to the configuration of localism and patriotism in English history as expressed in Chesterton's *A Short History of England* (1917). This developed in the Middle Ages, most crucially through the local liberty that was a distinctive feature of English feudalism, as Chesterton makes plain in emphasising the centralised form that feudalism took in France. The upshot was an appreciation of the value of liberty that was more marked in England than elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> For Chesterton, this combination of localism, liberty, and nationhood stood at the root of the English union. It formed the basis of the vibrant literary tradition in England whose pinnacle was reached in the novels of Dickens, a writer constantly alert to idiosyncracies of place and people. It was no accident, Chesterton wrote, in marking Dickens's birthday in 1902, that Dickens was associated with *The Daily News*; for he had the "hunger of humanity which is Liberalism." The spirit of liberty that had been fostered by the peculiar character of English feudalism was responsible in turn for a spirit of joy which Dickens also exemplified. Championing Dickens in this way was central to Chesterton's attack on the artists and writers associated with the *fin de siècle*, regretting that their rejection of art's duty to "copy" life had resulted in a withdrawal from life, unlike Dickens who drew out the "exuberant energy of life" through the technique of exaggeration. In following the stream of joy, "running like a river through heaven and earth," Dickens could not have been truer to life.<sup>21</sup>

For Chesterton, the true Christian faith from which the English people were severed at the Reformation became sublimated in their literary tradition.<sup>22</sup> This accounted for what he regarded as the roots of English literature in popular tradition; it is certainly something that explains his protest against attempts to professionalise the study of English literature, detaching it from the people to whom in his view it was organically tied. This is evident in his denunciation of efforts to set the study of English literature on the same objective footing as science,<sup>23</sup> the production of "primers,"<sup>24</sup> and most of all the establishment of the British Academy in 1902. In providing a focus for specialised scholarship in English literature, an

opportunity had been lost to extend and popularize the great work of English letters – from Shakespeare to Keats – that had taken place outside of the universities.<sup>25</sup>

But how could this portrait of the English as being uniquely, one could say, in touch with the temper of the cosmos be reconciled with the imperialism that had taken hold of the nation of late? How could the English have deserted so readily the spirit of patriotism in not only binding society together in a creative partnership but respecting the right of other societies to exist at the same time?

Here, Chesterton drew a distinction, not between jingoists and patriots but between elites and the people. The jingoist's instinct was sound in wanting to laud his country, erring only in mistaking military triumphs for *real* national excellences, those in the spiritual realm of literature and drama, for example.<sup>26</sup> By contrast, elites had succeeded in corrupting English patriotism by making it the servant of imperialism, at the expense of England, especially. While there had been an unbridgeable gap between elites and the people since the Reformation, this had been offset by the Stuarts in counteracting the intolerance of Puritan leaders in the seventeenth century; the oratory that tempered the evils of patronage in the eighteenth century; and the genuine opposition between party leaders in the nineteenth century, for example, Gladstone and Disraeli, as they competed for the popular vote.<sup>27</sup> But as Victoria's reign drew to a close, the English people were left at the mercy of Plutocracy, leaders who exploited the opportunities of imperial expansion for personal enrichment, leaving a trail of political corruption in their wake. As always, Ireland was the first to suffer from the new dispensation of power, not least through the passage of a series of Coercion Acts in an attempt to bring it to heel. It was Chesterton's bitter regret that England could have been a party to Irish oppression when, in its popular guise it was an oppressed nation itself.<sup>28</sup> However, the problem of an unholy alliance between Plutocracy and imperialism in England was far-reaching, creating a new mindset among elites. Most damning, like Kipling, they had lost their sense of place as the locus of patriotism. The problem became especially apparent with the treason trial that preoccupied Britain in January 1903. Alfred Lynch was an Australian-born Irish nationalist who had lived in Paris before taking up arms in South Africa and swearing allegiance to the Boer republic. When sentencing Lynch to death following his conviction, the presiding judge, Sir Alfred Wills, rebuked him thus:

What was your action in the darkest hour of your country's fortunes, when she was engaged in the deadly struggle from which she has just emerged? You joined the ranks of your country's foes... You have sought, as far as you could, to dethrone Great Britain from her place among nations, to make her name a byword and a reproach, a synonym for weakness and irresolution.<sup>29</sup>

Chesterton was incensed by the trial. In his view treason assumed the betrayal to an enemy of a nation with which relations had been "established" or "recognised" by the perpetrator. In prosecuting Lynch, the British establishment presumed that mere fact of birth in Australia by a person of Irish parentage engendered a duty of obedience to Britain. Legally, this was correct as, in accordance with Calvin's Law (1608), all those born in British territories were subjects of the Crown. But Chesterton ridiculed the license this gave the elite to defend a war that violated the patriotism of another people. He maintained that Nelson and Raleigh – two quintessential English patriots – would have turned in their graves. The anger of imperialist papers such as *The Globe* that was targeted at Lynch could in Chesterton's view only have been feigned. As such, it was an insult to patriotism: "for if an Englishman really

betrayed us in our 'darkest hour,' when foreign fleets were in the Thames and foreign armies in England, that anger would come as the blood of man comes, in a natural flood."<sup>30</sup>

Here again is Chesterton's sharp distinction between elites and masses on the question of patriotism; to his mind it represented a standing threat to democracy that could only be dislodged by the surrender of Britain's imperialist ambitions. For Chesterton, the misuse of patriotism by elites was rife in British public life in the first decade of the twentieth century. A notable example was their attempt in 1904 to establish "Empire Day" as the focus of national celebration, the un-English tone and content of which he denounced.<sup>31</sup> Worse, however, was the fiasco over the Education Bill in 1906, Chesterton's role in the failure of which has recently been illuminated by Susan Hanssen. In its concern to address Nonconformist concern at state support for Anglican schools, the Liberal Government attempted to lay the basis of a national educational system that would provide religious instruction throughout on a "non-denominational" basis. But Chesterton, building on Evangelical and Roman Catholic opposition, saw in the Bill simply a new state church in the making, the fulfilment of the aims of an assortment of secularists and moralists to uproot England's Christian heritage. As well as usurping the historic role of Christianity in English life, the state – through religious education in its schools – would also lay claim to the rich store of patriotism among the English that found expression in other realms than the political. His contempt for the thinking behind the bill is evident in his attack on Stanton Coit's book, *National Idealism and a State Church* (1907) in the year following the failure of the Bill. Coit's vision amounted to a return to "Emperor Worship" on which Christianity had turned its back.<sup>32</sup> In this respect, it would have appeared to Chesterton as all of a piece with the "religion" that had been made of patriotism by "national efficiency" zealots like Lord Rosebery.<sup>33</sup>

Chesterton emphasised that patriotism was not to be confused with religion in this manner. Nevertheless, in a spate of essays at the beginning of the twentieth century he made it clear that it was inextricably associated with Christianity as part of what he termed the general "passion for existence" at the heart of the latter. While tied to place, patriotism was distinct from the simple absorption of individuals in their surroundings that constituted the "animal tragedy." In this respect, patriotism was also the antithesis of the hereditary basis of the tribe; it had been forged instead out of the "adventurous spirit" that underlay the Christian belief in personal immortality. Chesterton hints strongly at the view that while individuals rarely strayed far from their locality, their mind engaged actively with it, reflecting a capacity to detach themselves from it. In this respect, as in the wider marking off of nations from one another, patriotism was consonant with Christianity's propensity to draw "black lines," to "separate things and... make them special." This was in accordance with the most basic of cosmic separations, that between the Creator and the world He had created.<sup>34</sup>

In these ways, patriotism was democratic to the core, clearing a large space for the free exercise of the cultural and spiritual imagination. This would be closed off if patriotism were usurped by the state, resulting in the "animal tragedy" and tribal mentality from which Christianity had liberated mankind. Chesterton regarded the "non-official" nature of patriotism as particularly marked in England.<sup>35</sup> Paradoxically, this had resulted from the "silencing" of its people over many centuries, the contours of which he set out in his famous poem, "The Secret People" in 1907.<sup>36</sup> But while he defended the French Revolution to the last, he made no call for an English equivalent that would establish an English national assembly either within the United Kingdom or outside it. When he spoke of the need for an English revolution at the height of the constitutional crisis of 1910-11 over the House of



Lords' rejection of Lloyd George's budget, it was not to enthrone the English nation in Westminster or anywhere else; it was rather to register a grass roots protest against the injustices perpetrated by an elite who had the gall to rule in England's name.<sup>37</sup> There is a certain parallel here with his response to Irish nationalism interpreted in the narrowly political terms of Home Rule. In an early article for *The Daily News* he applauded the efforts of Standish O'Grady, David Patrick Moran, Douglas Hyde and other writers associated with the Gaelic League to switch the focus of Irish nationalism away from politics and towards literature and history. In the absence of such a shift, the only expression of Irish nationalism's "love of Ireland" would be "hatred of England."<sup>38</sup>

For all Chesterton's astuteness as a politically engaged journalist, there was a deep vein of animosity towards politics running through his work. He did not identify wholly with the republican tradition that had emerged in the eighteenth century because it tended to make an idol out of political participation; its attachment not just to Christianity but patriotism as well was questionable, making problematic its democratic pretensions.<sup>39</sup> Curiously, this antipathy towards republicanism places him squarely beside Herbert Spencer, whose evolutionary social theory, especially as applied to religion, he rejected out of hand.<sup>40</sup> Thanks to the revisionist work of Mark Francis, Spencer is emerging as a thinker who saw in political democracy a new tool of domination based on the misguided assumption that the essence of freedom lay in participation in the public sphere. Spencer's liberalism, like Chesterton's, was grounded in a belief in the intrinsic importance of the private sphere as the basis of the corporate life of society, a perspective which belies the received view of Spencer as an apostle of individualism.<sup>41</sup>

It is all the more interesting in this light that Chesterton should have blamed sociologists, albeit "new sociologists," for much of the "worship of the state" in the thought of his contemporaries. He had in mind H.G. Wells, Sydney Webb and Benjamin Kidd, castigating the "bee-hive" and "ant-hill" morality they attributed to mankind. He found their attribution of this morality to "European men" particularly offensive, liberated by Christianity as the latter had been from the shackles of the greater collectivity. Writing in 1903, he asserted that in the eyes of these "insect philosophers," "it is a mark of degeneracy to care for the splendid moment, for a song, for rapturous preferences, for impossible quests, for irrational loyalties." What was needed was "a new loyalty, a Mammalian patriotism" to offset the obsession of modern thinkers with regimentation and a remote future. Not least, mammals reared their own offspring and did not expect the species at large to do it for them.<sup>42</sup>

It is this anti-political vein in Chesterton's thinking that has been targeted by critics. It has been linked with an antipathy towards progress understood in a particular, statist way. In turn it is related to what is perceived as the wider problem of English nationhood.<sup>43</sup> His critics assume that there is an historical inevitability about England's emergence into separate nationhood which the English refuse to accept. Chesterton is held to have side-stepped this problem, even while adding to its impetus, albeit inadvertently. Most recently, Tom Nairn has lighted upon Chesterton's Father Brown story about the "invisible man" as an allegory for the clever *British* disguise that England has donned for too long. Nairn's agenda is driven not so much by a concern for England as in accelerating Scotland's progress towards *its* destiny as an independent nation.<sup>44</sup>

But one can argue that the interest of Chesterton's Englishness is greatly diminished if made to serve the cause of political nationalism, or to illustrate the weakness of the latter in

England. While he strove to put more distance between England and Britain, not least in the light of Britain's status as an imperial power, he was a populist not a nationalist, although a populist with a distinctive English hue. His narratives of England were a means of raising the profile of the people in political discourse against the tendency of democracy – in Britain, at least – to enhance the power of elites. In this sense they well illustrate one of the most resonant of all political beliefs: the reserve capacity of the People, as the ultimate source of authority, to purify public life.<sup>45</sup> Not least, for Chesterton, the cleansing would be of all that was commonplace in politics, an intervention rooted in the sub-conscious. In 1903, in the course of attacking the false sensationalism of the Yellow Press, he envisaged a new party, the "Sub-Conscious party," that would engage the many timorous Members of Parliament, prominent among whom were George Brodrick and Austen Chamberlain. The resultant clash between the "Sub-Cons." and the "Non-Cons." would recall the "great spiritual sensationalism" of Christianity at its birth when it took the world "at a rush." This, surely, was Chesterton at the height of his myth-making powers, building a narrative of rightful possession on a simplistic theory of the collapse of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, his conception of the sub-conscious as the location of Christian faith and Englishness alike is most apparent here, although it is made to serve the universalist ends of a Trinitarian God rather than the particularist ends of the English nation.<sup>46</sup>

Chesterton's role in mobilising opposition to the Education Bill by religious groups whose faith was compromised by its provision certainly emphasizes the breadth of his English imagination. Of course, even in 1906, his partiality towards Catholic Christianity in Britain was already pronounced. This is clear in a letter he wrote to *The Westminster Gazette* in the midst of the controversy. He insisted that if the Bill went ahead, concessions would have to be made to "the important minorities," high on his list being "the Anglo-Catholics."<sup>47</sup> Yet he was receptive to all things English, religion especially, the only exception being Puritanism. This is evident in the support he lent to a campaign in 1931 to save Jordans Meeting House – an icon of the Quaker movement near his home in Beaconsfield – from the intrusion of road traffic following plans for a local road-widening scheme. His response to the head of the Penn Country branch of the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural England (Buckinghamshire) is worth quoting in full.

I am most warmly in favour of the effort... which aims at preserving Jordans and its setting from the operation of this dull mania for driving ugly roads through places, and past places, to the disadvantage of those who still possess the intelligence to go to places. Jordans is not only a historic place; it is one of the few examples of such a place that has contrived to remain a place, and has not been turned by tourists into a totally different sort of place. It is a shrine of pilgrimage which does still to some extent exist for pilgrims, and not only for touts and trippers. The shrine is not one of my religion, but it is one of enormous significance in the history of my country. What many people will not understand is that what should remain sacred in such a place is the place; the approach, the surroundings, the background; not detached and dead objects that might be put in a museum. The effect of Stonehenge is the effect of Salisbury Plain. If you wire in Stonehenge like a beast at the zoo, you are really making it a fetish, and idolatrously worshipping the mere stones; instead of seeing the large vision of the beginnings of Britain. Anybody who would leave Jordans must leave it looking like Jordans. And

Stonehenge marks only a dead religion. Whereas the other is historic in the living sense that its history is not ended, for no one knows what may come at last of that revival of a purer mysticism in spite of the storms of Puritanism; of the beginnings of a Reformation of the Reformation, and of the greatness of William Penn.<sup>48</sup>

Few quotations serve better to illustrate the depth and breadth of Chesterton's national identity; also his conception of the sanctity of place as the cornerstone of a larger patriotism. In addition, his expression of admiration for William Penn underlines his sympathy with a stream of Nonconformity that had not been tainted by the narrowness of Puritanism. Elsewhere Chesterton revelled in Penn's religious and political independence, upholding his doctrine of the "inner light" as a "faith that has not yet failed."<sup>49</sup>

Chesterton's opposition to the attempt by Liberals to unify England on narrow, pseudo-religious lines does not easily support a reading of his Englishness as "reactionary"; nor does it point to a struggling English nationalist trying to escape from the prison of Britishness but preferring, in the end, the mantle of invisibility. Perhaps the clearest reason why Chesterton fails the test of "modern" nationalism is the close alignment in his thought between religion and nationhood. This is against those who maintain that nationalism is a purely secular phenomenon, the product of an age of the death of faith and its substitute in holding together large, amorphous societies.<sup>50</sup> But Chesterton's significance for English national identity today lies in his contribution to a tradition of reflection that is open-ended, unconstrained by pre-determined "national" ends. His patriotism and Englishness were immersed within a broad sweep of history that proved a powerful instrument of critique, political and cultural. Grounded in the experience of a particular society, they were rational responses to the problems of his age, if self-consciously anti-rationalist. Above all, they represent his sympathetic ordering of that experience at an imaginative and rhetorical level. In this sense there is a large aesthetic aspect to Chesterton's nationalism (SEE THE SECRET OF ENGLAND) that defies the categories of sociology and political science and emphasizes their limitations. Chesterton's voice in English discourse is perhaps best captured in Michael Oakeshott's analogy of patriotism with friendship. In both cases, Oakeshott argued, "the tie is one of familiarity, not usefulness; the disposition engaged is conservative, not 'progressive.'"<sup>51</sup> As scholars of contemporary Englishness locate their subject in a plethora of conversations inspired by Oakeshott, a reminder of the common ground that Oakeshott shared with an earlier thinker could not be more timely.

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to Arthur Aughey and Robert Dyson for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> "Our English Goblins," *The Speaker*, 23 February, 1901, pp. 573-4.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Aughey, *The Politics of Englishness* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 7. See also Arthur Aughey and Christine Berberich (eds.), *These Englands: A Conversation on National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2010), Introduction.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Oakeshott, "The Tower of Babel," in *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), 59, 72-3.

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<sup>5</sup> “A Wild Reconstruction,” *The Daily News* (hereafter *DN*), 13 December, 1901, 9; reprinted in Dorothy Collins (ed.), *Lunacy and Letters* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1958), 34-8. Compare this quotation with Oakeshott’s famous analogy of political activity, rightly considered, with men “sail[ing] a boundless and bottomless sea.” Understood thus, “there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-point nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel...” “Political Education,” in *Rationalism in Politics*, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Oakeshott, “Historical Events,” in *On History: and Other Essays* (1983; Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1999), 102.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Oakeshott, “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind,” in *Rationalism in Politics*, 205.

<sup>8</sup> The best short introduction to Oakeshott’s thought is Robert Grant, *Oakeshott* (London: Claridge Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> C.T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 29. The essay that influenced Butterfield was “Our Notebook,” *The Illustrated London News*, 25 November, 1922, p. 836.

<sup>10</sup> William Oddie, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 40-41.

<sup>11</sup> *Autobiography*, in *Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (hereafter *CW*), XVI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 48, 41.

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Brundage and Richard A. Cosgrove, *The Great Tradition: Constitutional History and National Identity in Britain and the United States, 1870-1960* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2. For the influence of Anglo-Saxonism in the study of constitutional history in the late-nineteenth century, see ch. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *A Short History of England* (1917), in *CW*, XX (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 455.

<sup>14</sup> “The Delusion of Races,” *The Daily News*, 26 November, 1904, 6.

<sup>15</sup> *A Short History of England*, 440.

<sup>16</sup> “A Neglected Originality,” *DN*, 30 October, 1902, 8. Chesterton was writing in praise of Roden Noel (1834-1894), father of his friend and radical Anglican cleric, Conrad Noel, and the early-Victorian influences on Roden Noel’s poetry, the Brownings, especially.

<sup>17</sup> “A Plea for Political Unreason,” *DN*, 24 June, 1905, 6.

<sup>18</sup> “The Five Fatherlands of Rudyard Kipling,” *DN*, 1 October, 1903, 8.

<sup>19</sup> Joseph R. McCleary, *The Historical Imagination of G.K. Chesterton: Locality, Patriotism, and Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 39, 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; *A Short History of England*, 460, although Chesterton here makes clear that there was a downside to local liberty in England when the communal orders at local level were laid to waste by the “new Barony” that was ushered in by the Reformation.

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- <sup>21</sup>“Charles Dickens,” *DN*, 8 February, 1902,
- <sup>22</sup> “Explaining the English” (1935), *CW*, XX (San Francisco: Ignatius Press), 623-4.
- <sup>23</sup> “The Curse of Collins” [unsigned], *DN*, 1 March, 1901, 6.
- <sup>24</sup> “A Grammar of Shelley,” *DN*, 12 September, 1901, 6.
- <sup>25</sup> “The Ways of the World: The New English Academy,” *Pall Mall Magazine* (March 1902), 427-31.
- <sup>26</sup> “Patriotism and Play-Acting,” *The Speaker*, 29 April, 1905, 118-19.
- <sup>27</sup> “The Soul of Charles II,” *DN*, 16 July, 190, 6; *A Short History of England*, 518, 554; “The Ruin of Representative Government,” *The Westminster Gazette*, 4 January 1912, 3.
- <sup>28</sup> “Mr. Shaw’s Escape,” *DN*, 20 July 1907, p. 6. Chesterton was here delighting in George Bernard Shaw’s conversion to Home Rule, if for all the wrong reasons, in his play “John Bull’s Other Island.”
- <sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 24 January, 1903, 14 (e).
- <sup>30</sup> “The Sin of Treason,” *DN*, 28 January, 1903, 7. For Lynch’s fate – his death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment – see David Fitzpatrick, “Arthur Alfred Lynch, 1861-1934,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 34 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 873-75.
- <sup>31</sup> “What is it?,” *DN*, 29 May, 1909, 6; and *Illustrated London News*, 30 May 1908, 778.
- <sup>32</sup> Susan E. Hanssen, “‘English in Spirit’: G.K. Chesterton, Church and State, and the 1906 Education Act Debate,” *The Catholic Social Science Review* 13 (2008), 60.
- <sup>33</sup> “On a Certain Phrase,” *DN*, 14 October, 1905, 6.
- <sup>34</sup> “The Delusion of Races,” *DN*, 26 November, 1904, 6; “The God of the Tribe,” *DN*, 14 April, 1906, 6; “On Black Lines,” *DN*, 9 September, 1905, 6.
- <sup>35</sup> “Explaining the English,” 623-24.
- <sup>36</sup> “The Secret People,” *The Neolith* 1 (November 1907), 1-2.
- <sup>37</sup> “The Unpopularity of the People,” *DN*, 18 December, 1909, 6.
- <sup>38</sup> “Ideals in Ireland,” [unsigned] *DN*, 11 February, 1901.
- <sup>39</sup> Julia Stapleton, *Christianity, Patriotism and Nationhood: The England of G.K. Chesterton* (Lanham, Md., Lexington Books, 2009), 211-12.
- <sup>40</sup> “The War of the Gods and Ghosts,” *The Speaker*, 9 February, 1901, 518-20.
- <sup>41</sup> Mark Francis, *Herbert Spencer and the Invention of Modern Life* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), 337-8.

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<sup>42</sup>“The Worship of the Insect,” *DN*, 7 March 1903, 8.

<sup>43</sup>Patrick Wright, “Last Orders,” *The Guardian Review*, 9 April, 2005, 4-6; and “Last Orders for the English Aborigine,” *Soundings*, 24 (Spring, 2005), 21-34.

<sup>44</sup> Tom Nairn, “The English Postman,” *OurKingdom*, 9 October 2009, [http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/tom\\_nairn/english\\_postman](http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/tom_nairn/english_postman), accessed 9 October, 2009.

<sup>45</sup> Margaret Canovan, “The People,” in John Dryzek, Bonnie Honig and Anne Phillips, *The Oxford Handbook of Political Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 359.

<sup>46</sup> “The Mildness of the Journalist,” *DN*, 2 May, 1903, 8.

<sup>47</sup> “The Enigma of the Education Bill,” *The Westminster Gazette*, 26 April, 1906, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Chesterton to Mr. G. Langley Taylor, 15 July 1931, Chesterton Papers, British Library, BL Add MS 73240 folios 98-99.

<sup>49</sup> “And What about the Quakers?,” *Sidelights* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1932), 148-52.

<sup>50</sup> Krishan Kumar, “Reply,” in John Hutchinson *et al* “Debate on Krishan Kumar’s *The Making of English National Identity*,” *Nations and Nationalism*, 13:2 (2007), 200.

<sup>51</sup> M. Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative,” *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1962), 177.